

Ham reduction

Walk, Roger A.
From: Lenling, Amy
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To: Neidle, Bruce L.; Arwady, Marjorie D.; Carchman, Loreen; Carcich, Claire; Counts, Mary Ellen; Desel, Paula; Lewis, Jane Y.; Murillo, Joe; Nelson, Christopher (PMMC); Osborne, Kevin (PMMC Legal); Patskan, George J.; Podraza, Ken F.; Reininghaus, Wolf; Roethig, Hans; Suter, Eric; Walk, Roger A.; Whidden, Roger
Subject: 'Safer' cigarettes show promise -- or threat

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Catherine Clabby, Staff Writer
The News and Observer

Now that cigarette makers such as Durham-based Vector Tobacco are peddling smokes with promises of less toxins in each puff, longtime combatants in the cigarette wars agree that it's time for more federal oversight.

But the two camps -- public health groups on one side and tobacco companies on the other -- want entirely different things from any government regulation of this emerging market of re-engineered smokes.

In petitions filed with the Food and Drug Administration last week, 18 public health groups said the government should yank five new tobacco-related products off the market. Those products include Omni, Vector Tobacco's new "reduced-carcinogens" brand. The petitioners want Omni and other products to pass rigorous safety tests required of new drugs. "It's right to attempt to lower known cancer-causing agents in cigarettes. It's wrong to lead consumers to conclude that there is already scientific evidence that the changes actually reduce their risk," said Matthew Myers, president of the national Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and an organizer of the petition filing.

Tobacco companies say they want help, not punishment, from the government as they try to improve products they now acknowledge are deadly and addictive. At least four cigarette makers (tiny Vector and the larger Philip Morris USA, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. and Lorillard Tobacco) say they would welcome federal help to assess the new "reduced-risk" brands.

"We need a regulatory scheme for cigarettes that is different," said Brendan McCormick, a Philip Morris spokesman. "Food and drug regulations were set up for food and drugs. Cigarettes don't fit neatly into those categories."

But tobacco opponents fear this newest generation of cigarettes may be just the latest marketing innovation by companies that once added filters and then low-tar and low-nicotine brands to project safer images. Just last month, a National Cancer Institute study reported that changes in cigarette design and production over the last 50 years did not protect smokers from lung cancer, heart disease or emphysema.

"Consumers have more information about the orange juice in their refrigerators than they do about cigarettes," said Sally Herndon Malek, head of the tobacco prevention and control branch of the N.C. Division of Public Health.

Investment in research into so-called reduced-risk brands are popping up in all corners of the

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cigarette industry. That's because cigarette makers, after a \$ 206 billion court settlement with 46 states, now acknowledge their products are toxic. Also, market surveys tell them smokers want safer brands.

R.J. Reynolds, based in Winston-Salem, has revived test marketing for Eclipse, a cigarette that mostly heats tobacco rather than burns it. Based on a chemical analysis of its smoke and tests on animals and the urine and lungs of smokers, RJR says Eclipse may pose less risk of cancer, chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

Star Scientific and Brown & Williamson are test-marketing Advance cigarettes with the slogan "All of the Taste, Less of the Toxins." Philip Morris, maker of the top-selling Marlboro brand, and Lorillard, which makes Newports and Kents, are both aggressively researching ways to make less dangerous cigarettes.

Vector has most strongly tied its fortunes to the potential success of less-toxic cigarettes. The company's start-up is based in the nearly vacant Liggett & Myers plant that sprawls just west of downtown Durham, once a cigarette-making capital.

Omni, to be sold initially at 35,000 spots across the country, is just one piece of Vector's business plan.

The company was founded last year by Vector Group, run by tobacco maverick Bennett LeBow, to use science to make and market less-risky cigarettes. It plans to soon introduce a nearly nicotine-free cigarette made from a bio-engineered tobacco leaf developed at N.C. State University. And its scientists are trying to reduce cigarettes carbon monoxide, a poison tied closely to heart disease in smokers.

Vector's founders are confident their market will take off. They're already renovating a manufacturing plant in Roxboro for their new products. Their scientists expect to move out of an aged Liggett research building to a new state-of-the-art research center to be built somewhere in the Triangle next year.

But the company says it needs help from the government: fair guidance on how to test the new goods and controls on what it and its competitors can say about why the cigarettes are different.

"If you don't have the government involved, you don't know what the rules are when you make a claim," said Howard Lorber, president and chief operating officer of Vector Group. "Our concern is that we could go through all this testing, come up with good results and then have someone tell us that wasn't good enough."

Lorber said Vector Group is even willing to change existing brands made by Liggett Group -- a related company and the maker of small sellers such as Eve and several discount cigarettes -- with any technology that Vector Tobacco develops to reduce cigarette toxins.

But bigger companies, such as Philip Morris and RJR, want government regulators to let them preserve their existing brands, which include huge sellers such as Marlboro and Winston.

"At the end of the day, our bottom line is that we support regulations as long as it continues to allow us to compete for the business of adult smokers," said RJR Tobacco spokesman Seth Moskowitz.

That selective interest in regulation raises suspicion among the public health groups that recently

filed petitions with the FDA. The groups include the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association and the American Lung Association.

"It makes no sense to have government-required testing that lets people make claims of reduced risk and not testing the most dangerous products on the market," Myers said. "That would be like arguing Firestone can produce two kinds of tires, one that blows up in hot weather and one that is safe."

Smoking opponents are fighting the movement to market potentially less risky cigarettes on other fronts too. Indiana Tobacco Prevention and Cessation is running a newspaper ad protesting the use of Indianapolis as a test market for Advance. Under a photograph of a dead guinea pig laying next to a cigarette butt, the copy reads: "A little poison won't leave you any less dead."

The FDA has 180 days to rule on the public health group's petitions. If the agency rejects them, it would be up to Congress to force the FDA or some other agency to regulate tobacco. Last year the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that existing laws don't give the FDA authority over an industry that won congressional exemption from such regulation decades ago. But talk of tobacco regulation has had a very low profile in the U.S. Congress of late.

Even if government regulators don't act, however, scientists outside the cigarette industry, even researchers at the National Cancer Institute, are beginning to talk among themselves about how to objectively judge any benefits from this latest generation of cigarettes. But they are proceeding carefully.

An Institute of Medicine committee earlier this year found creating a "reduced-risk" cigarette product is scientifically feasible, but proving its effectiveness would take rigorous study.

Scott Leishchow, chief of the tobacco control research branch at the National Cancer Institute, said scientists affiliated with his organization are beginning to formally discuss how to better gauge the risks people encounter from cigarettes, including the newer brands promising less toxins to smokers.

But they want to be careful that they don't give anyone the false impression that there is such a thing as a safe cigarette. There is not.

"There is tremendous interest. At the same time there's a degree of reticence to jump too far forward. One concern is that people might decide to not quit smoking and instead switch over to the other products," Leishchow said. "That would be a net loss."

*can we
talk to him?
(a)*
(a) Rick had talked to him
already. litigation may limit
L. ability to talk to us.

01/28/02

Saw him (young man) at
SRNT Meeting, Savannah
02/23/02